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Knowledge

Context

I am one of those teachers who knew from a young age that I wanted to work in the classroom. I enjoyed going to school and rarely missed days. What's curious is that I was an average student at best. I loved the social aspect of school. Not just seeing my friends, but class discussion, talking things out, getting to know my peers and teachers. The, often, repetitive tasks of homework assignments seemed like busy work, and I rarely felt they were worth it, hence the poor grades. Even if it was meaningful, it was often never presented in a way that my adolescent brain could see. Conversations, however, were dynamic and flexible. It felt like the students had some agency in the ways the conversations went and topics we focused on. Even as a young person, this style of teaching is why I rarely missed a day. So many of my current interests were forged in the classroom. I was inspired not just to do well on my World History test, but find new and exciting music, movies, and explore my hobbies and interests. My teacher's enthusiasm about living and teaching made me enthusiastic about "things." We never mentioned the curriculum and they weren't afraid to be "real." It really felt like we were just there asking questions, talking, and learning. The curriculum was filtered through who my teachers were as people. In retrospect, it seems my experience may have been an exception to many people my age.

As a teacher, I try to run my classroom in a similar fashion. Sure, they occasionally have individual assignments and even sporadic homework, but I try to present all of that with intention and a clear understanding of why we are doing what we are doing, how it connects to the curriculum, the skills that are being practiced, and the success criteria. I am enthusiastic about the content, but more enthusiastic about how my students interpret it and what they share each day.

When considering a masters program, I wanted something that would honor this idea of flexible student led teaching. Technology, by design, is evolving, changing, and innovating, and I felt that a degree program centered around technology must promote these ideas. Additionally, there is no denying that having an understanding of contemporary technology and how to use them effectively is an essential skill in the 21st century. I applied to the [Masters of Art in Education Technology](#) (MAET) at Michigan State University to gain an understanding of the available technology to allow my students the most flexibility, agency, and ultimately, success in the classroom and beyond.

Here at the end of the program, I can summarize it through three major ideas that can both work for educators and students. Contemporary students are laser focused on finding the correct answers, but the first take away from MAET is asking the right questions. By questioning, we can discover the problem in its full breadth and depth, and with that knowledge, ideally, seek solutions. With the problem defined, we should design with intention. What, specifically, do you

want your students to take from it? How can you provide them avenues to filter the concepts through their contexts and interests? With lessons designed, we must be open to creativity and failure. With a deeper understanding of a task or problem, experimenting and seeking creative solutions can lead to stunning conclusions or colossal failures, but those failures and revisions give you more insight and direction towards the eventual solution. Several courses taught, and reinforced, these themes.

Ask the Right Questions

Applying Educational Technology to Issues of Practice (CEP 812) is centered around Warren Berger's book [A More Beautiful Question](#) which illustrates how innovation is often based around questioning. Berger mentions that, "...the average four-year-old British girl asks her poor mum 390 questions a day" (pg. 4). While adults often ask questions to seek simple answers, Berger found that, "By age four, the lion's share of the questions are seeking explanations, not just facts" (pg. 40). These questions are built around the personal understanding of children that adults know more than they do. It seems as we get older we stop asking for help. Maybe we think we are the smartest person in the room?

Our primary task for this course was to get to the bottom of a "wicked problem." These problems have several, often moving, solutions. Beyond being a classroom teacher, I am our current union vice president. Working in my union role, I see first hand how exhausted teachers are. The job must be sustainable for educators to be as effective as possible. I started by asking, "Why are teachers overworked?" The complexity of this problem lies with the dynamic quality of our roles. For example, my job as a secondary high school teacher is vastly different from an elementary teacher in the same district.

Through surveying local teachers, it became clear that they felt their time was not respected. From professional development that often seemed to be thrown together at the last minute, to long evaluation processes, and a constant focus on standardized tests, the results of which were placed solely at the feet of teachers, teachers were responsible for so much with little time to prepare for it. By cutting tasks and providing appropriate planning time, teachers felt they would be more successful and effective. My final results can be viewed [here](#). Teaching is a selfless career, but to be a successful teacher, we must consider self care, boundaries, and how to effectively prioritize all of the challenges of our job.

Beyond attempting to solve wicked problems, asking questions is at the foundation of designing and administering high quality lesson plans. I continued to think about how to get my students to detach from their near addictive desire to earn points and get the answers, to a more natural academic curiosity led by questions and discussion, and these thoughts would impart many of the decisions I would make as I continued with my masters program and still in my classroom.

Design With Intentionality

Learning Technology by Design (CEP 817) focused on the iterative process of design. Following the Stanford Design School's [Design Thinking Bootleg](#), we must empathize with our audience and compromise with topics that question our contexts, define clear problems through

questioning, experiment with creative ideas, and prototype and test those ideas until we find a conclusion. I was reminded of the process of writing that I teach in my English Language Arts course. Consider your audience, define the task, draft, revise, etc. These skills are so beneficial to real world problems, and this course continued my ongoing thinking about wicked problems and proper questioning. Ultimately, the course tasked us with creating a lesson that works through this process.

Continuing to think about this after CEP 812 made me want to try to rekindle the childhood curiosity mentioned in [A More Beautiful Question](#). I felt that some of what hammers this out of students is the high stakes environment of the classroom. How could I limit the stress, invite experimentation, and increase engagement? Starting with an Independent Reading unit, I cut required book lists and allowed students to choose whichever book they were interested in. Once selected, we began by simply writing a couple questions about the book. Instead of having students tell me what they found interesting about the cover, they crafted questions to the author, such as, “Why did you choose include, X, Y, Z, etc.?” The intention was for the students to consider the author's choice and empathize with the human who created the work. Some students did use social media platforms to attempt engagement with the author, but that was not required. As they read the book, they would provide answers to their questions. Hopefully, promoting a deeper understanding of the text.

For assessment models, they were allowed to find a related piece of media. This media could be a film, video, podcast, song, playlist, TikTok video, etc. Once located, they had to write a brief argument explaining the connections and share it with the class. By allowing students to select their book and the media used to explain the book, they were more engaged. Additionally, the challenging nature of pairing media all but required the students to ask questions, speak up, and have a complex understanding of their selected book. Through a combination of a low stakes environment, student choice, and some fairly complex analysis, students were asking questions, engaging with reading, and experiencing cathartic “eureka” moments. Some of this analysis was difficult for its conceptual complexity, so I had to go back and revise to edit by providing models of successful analysis. There were also several more popular options because they were deemed “easier.” Students were more likely to analyze a piece of art that already existed than try to create something new. I made some edits to those options to ensure I got a wide variety of responses. Ultimately, I split the assignment into two. One where students had to find a paired text, and the other where they had to create some original paired media. While the analysis provided challenges, even those who were frustrated, confused, or overwhelmed at first were able to be successful through coaching and leading questions such as, “What are you interested in?” How does the feeling of that song fit with the conflict of your book?”, What music might the main character be interested in?”. The student choice stoked their interest, but these types of questions led to their understanding, and their understanding led to deeper analysis. Questions make concepts, curriculum, and success criteria clearer for the students, but creativity and eventual failure help achieve that success criteria.

Open Yourself to Creativity and Failure

The MAET Summer hybrid program consisted of two pathways, but I attended the pathway including, Learning in School and Other Settings (CEP 800), Creativity in Teaching and Learning (CEP 818), and Approaches to Education Research (CEP 822). These 9 credits were presented over 6 weeks that comprised both online and in person courses. While three distinct sets of concepts, they were weaved into one cohesive idea, of opening yourself to creativity and failure. Continuing the earlier concepts of questioning and iterative design, and adding theories of learning dynamic learning experiences, we were tasked with revising a unit plan. Being the penultimate courses before this capstone class, hybrid would be a culmination of the bulk of my graduate experience. I selected to revise the Macbeth unit in our English 11 course. I wanted to incorporate a wide variety of technology, including software for podcasts, vlogging, and coding. I wanted the lesson to honor my students' interests and who they are as learners. I wanted this lesson to potentially teach me something new about Macbeth.

The unit I inherited featured several assessments based around simple memorization. Students were simply regurgitating what happened in the story. Inspired by lessons I had created in earlier classes, I wanted to develop assignments and assessments where students had agency. From creating playlists to represent the characters, making art that captures mood or theme using AI generated art software, to considering the theme of fate vs. free will by looking at modern computer algorithms and how they influence our decision making, I wanted to illustrate how a text that is several centuries old can still be relevant.

Built around the idea of revision and failing forward, students would iterate on these projects, revise, and end exploring a variety of technologies and how they could present themes and ideas from Macbeth. The final draft can be viewed [here](#). The Summer hybrid program reinforced all of the concepts of the MAET program and was built from the ground up in the spirit of experimentation, creativity, revision, and the vulnerability of learning. It was so nice to get back in the classroom, share ideas, and remember what it was like to be a classroom student. It was nice to be reminded that I am not the smartest person in the room, and I am only as knowledgeable as the conversations I am willing to engage in.

Synthesis

The song Knowledge by Operation Ivy, said it best with, "All I know is that I don't know nothing." Filtered through the mind of a teenager desperately trying to "figure it all out," it reminds me my students are young, curious, and inundated with content and media at a rate never seen in human history. The song reminds me that good educators are always learning. There is power in this mindset of accepting the manta of "knowing nothing" and craving the desire to, one day, get there. We educators are learning from our peers and fellow staff members, occasionally professional development, graduate classes, and most importantly, our students. Above all, my masters program has taught me to be flexible and recognize the importance of communal learning. Our students play a role in who we are as educators, how we present our lessons, and the way we adapt and change those lessons each day. When we all come together and accept the vulnerability of learning, it makes the process of learning more engaging, fun, and effective. Considering this, it is no surprise that my MAET story, and my mantra for one day "getting

there,” was captured in the eloquence of a teenage punk rock band in 1988, “All I know is that I don’t know nothing, and that’s fine.”

References:

Berger, W. (2014). *A More Beautiful Question*. Bloomsbury.